

Lecture 14: Rhetorical Train Wrecks and Triumphs

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Owen Collins's *Speeches That Changed the World*.

When I set out to write this lecture, my idea was to find obscure speeches that were rhetorically brilliant as well as speeches from famous people that were rhetorically terrible. Unfortunately for my original conception, it turns out that there just are not many great, unknown speeches. This is possibly due to politicians recycling good speeches and continuously polishing them until they become very effective and eventually famous. Or perhaps it is simply that the famous speeches really deserve their reputations. I found that the old chestnuts of rhetorical studies, *The Gettysburg Address*, Martin Luther King Jr.'s *I Have a Dream* speech and Winston Churchill's *We Will Fight Them on the Beaches; Blood, Toil, Tears and Sweat*; and *Sinews of Peace* ("Iron Curtain") speeches, for instance, are really as great rhetorically as they are thought to be. I found other speeches that get referenced a lot for their rhetorical virtuosity turn out not to have worn very well. Lincoln's famous second inaugural and William Jennings Bryan's *Cross of Gold* speeches, for instance, are so tangled up in the issues of the time that they do not lend themselves to rhetorical admiration without an awful lot of historical background having to be thrown in by the professor. Pericles' funeral oration is likewise so much about contemporary politics (in ancient Athens) that it does not translate well.

I have also come to the conclusion that presidential State of the Union speeches are almost uniformly terrible—long laundry lists of this program or that program that might have mattered when they were given but are of merely historical interest now. I also discovered that some of the best speeches you can find are not really speeches at all, but dramatizations of speeches by Shakespeare. Of course he had the advantage of being able to control the characters, the situation, and at least some of the audience response (i.e., the audience that was made up of actors on the stage), and Shakespearean speeches were never actually delivered to troops waiting to go into battle, and furthermore, I do not recommend that contemporary politicians attempt to cast their speeches in iambic pentameter. Nevertheless, his speeches show that Shakespeare had mastered the art of rhetoric more than many professional politicians have.

It was also a lot harder to find rhetorical train wrecks than I had anticipated. Most of the famous bad speeches or performances were not really rhetorical: they were gaffes, slips of the tongue, factual errors. So President Ford's accidentally saying that Poland was free (when it was under communist dictatorship) or, well, just about anything Dan Quayle ever said, or Al Gore's sighing debate performance or George H.W. Bush's accidentally reading "Message:

I care” cannot really count as rhetorical train wrecks. These are, however, rhetorically weak speeches that, upon close examination, were in fact train wrecks for their speakers. Let us briefly look at some of these before we turn to the triumphs.

We will begin with one of the most recent. John Kerry had a train wreck of a convention speech in 2004. This was surprising, because Kerry can be a good speaker, and he can be a good speech writer. But for his biggest speech ever, he started out:

“I’m John Kerry and I’m reporting for duty.”

It is possible that John Kerry lost the presidential election right there. Because what was so important to him—to emphasize his war-hero persona—was not the purpose of the speech he was giving. His speech was meant to show him as possessing the qualities that the American people want in a president. The president is, after all, a leader. But by saying “reporting for duty,” Kerry immediately gave the impression of a low-level soldier saluting his commanding officer. Yes, one could make the argument that the president does his duty by serving the American people. But Kerry was not an incumbent president, and he needed to show leadership. Instead of portraying himself as the leader, he showed himself as a follower and communicated the idea that he wanted to relive his Viet Nam experience. These were exactly the wrong connotations.

Kerry continued:

“My fellow Americans, we’re here tonight united in one purpose: to make America stronger at home and respected in the world. A great American—a great American novelist wrote that you can’t go home again. He could not have imagined this evening. Tonight, I am home; home—home where my public life began and those who made it possible live.”

You will also notice somewhat striking similarities between Kerry’s opening and that of another candidate for president, Al Gore (although this speech was given in 1996, when Gore was running for a second term as Vice President; Gore’s own acceptance speech in 2000 was significantly better):

“Four years later, we meet in this great city of Chicago, the place Carl Sandburg called ‘the city of the big shoulders . . . with lifted head so proud to be alive . . . and strong.’ Four years later, Democrats are proud. Our hopes are alive. And America is strong.”

Both Kerry and Gore make the mistake of giving a quoted reference when they could have used an allusion (Kerry to Thomas Wolfe, the “American novelist” he cites; Gore, even more pedantically, to Carl Sandburg’s Chicago poem). Both candidates seem to have a need to prove that they are smart and cultured, but what the reference does is distract from the flow of the speech itself. And neither Kerry or Gore needed to prove that they were smart, anyway. That was not the issue. In both cases the candidates had not clearly thought through their audience’s needs; they had not analyzed the rhetorical situation. Their job was not to make themselves look smart or literary; it was to make themselves look like leaders. Kerry’s speech got somewhat better in places. Gore’s did not.

I seem to be picking on one political party, and for that I apologize, but I could not in fact find a speech from the other party that was worthy of being called a train wreck. Perhaps this is actually to the credit of Gore and Kerry, who wrote their own speeches, whereas George W. Bush uses professional speech writers. I noted in analyzing Bush's speeches that they appear much better on paper than they are in his delivery, which is hampered by him appearing to give relatively short sentences and to pause at the end of each line. This prevents him from stumbling, but it also prevents the speech from developing the flow and variation that marks good rhetoric.

Compare, for example, any Bush speech to the speeches of one of the great rhetoricians of the twentieth century, Winston Churchill. In his *Sinews of Peace* speech given at Westminster College in Missouri, Churchill noted the many millions of people struggling to provide peace and security to their families:

“To give security to these countless homes, they must be shielded from the two giant marauders, war and tyranny. We all know the frightful disturbances in which the ordinary family is plunged when the curse of war swoops down upon the bread-winner and those for whom he works and contrives. The awful ruin of Europe, with all its vanished glories, and of large parts of Asia glares us in the eyes. When the designs of wicked men or the aggressive urge of mighty States dissolve over large areas the frame of civilised society, humble folk are confronted with difficulties with which they cannot cope. For them all is distorted, all is broken, even ground to pulp.

When I stand here this quiet afternoon I shudder to visualise what is actually happening to millions now and what is going to happen in this period when famine stalks the earth. None can compute what has been called ‘the unestimated sum of human pain.’ Our supreme task and duty is to guard the homes of the common people from the horrors and miseries of another war. We are all agreed on that.”

Note the variation in sentence length, the creation of powerful images (the “two giant marauders,” the “curse of war” that “swoops” down, the “vanished glories of Europe”), and the way he ends the two paragraphs: “even ground to pulp” is a painful emptiness and “we are all agreed on that” is the ultimate enthymeme.

Churchill also knew how to build an extended metaphor and use it to compel agreement and explain a complex idea:

“I spoke earlier of the Temple of Peace. Workmen from all countries must build that temple. If two of the workmen know each other particularly well and are old friends, if their families are intermingled, and if they have ‘faith in each other’s purpose, hope in each other’s future and charity towards each other’s shortcomings’—to quote some good words I read here the other day—why cannot they work together at the common task as friends and partners? Why cannot they share their tools and thus increase each other’s working powers? Indeed they must do so or else the temple may not be built, or, being built, it may collapse, and we shall all be proved again unteachable and have

to go and try to learn again for a third time in a school of war, incomparably more rigorous than that from which we have just been released. The dark ages may return, the Stone Age may return on the gleaming wings of science, and what might now shower immeasurable material blessings upon mankind, may even bring about its total destruction. Beware, I say; time may be short. Do not let us take the course of allowing events to drift along until it is too late. If there is to be a fraternal association of the kind I have described, with all the extra strength and security which both our countries can derive from it, let us make sure that that great fact is known to the world, and that it plays its part in steadying and stabilising the foundations of peace. There is the path of wisdom. Prevention is better than cure.”

Again, note the use of metaphor and the particularly Churchillian technique of creating images of horror before moving to a powerful, positive conclusion. Note also how the extended metaphor of the Temple of Peace is created, rested for a while, and then brought up at the very end of the paragraph in the phrase “stabilizing the foundations of peace.”

But it is not peace, but war, that has brought out the greatest rhetorical triumphs. This is sadly not surprising, for war mobilizes human passions like no other endeavor. In literature we find some of Shakespeare’s greatest rhetorical accomplishments associated with war. For example, the famous St. Crispin’s Day speech in *Henry V*, given by Henry (the now-grown Prince Hal from the two *Henry IV* plays) to rally his troops at Agincourt:

This day is called the feast of Crispian:

He that outlives this day, and comes safe home,
Will stand a tip-toe when the day is named,
And rouse him at the name of Crispian.

He that shall live this day, and see old age,
Will yearly on the vigil feast his neighbours,
And say ‘To-morrow is Saint Crispian’:

Then will he strip his sleeve and show his scars.

And say ‘These wounds I had on Crispin’s day.’

Old men forget: yet all shall be forgot,

But he’ll remember with advantages

What feats he did that day: then shall our names.

Familiar in his mouth as household words

Harry the king, Bedford and Exeter,

Warwick and Talbot, Salisbury and Gloucester,

Be in their flowing cups freshly remember’d.

This story shall the good man teach his son;

And Crispin Crispian shall ne’er go by,

From this day to the ending of the world,

But we in it shall be remember'd;
We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,
This day shall gentle his condition:
And gentlemen in England now a-bed
Shall think themselves accursed they were not here,
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day.

Perhaps one has to see and hear this speech performed to appreciate fully the power of Shakespeare's words. Note how Henry brings the entire army into unity through the two-part technique of first calling the army a band of brothers and then adding "he who sheds his blood with me shall be my brother," showing how the individuals can be so welded together. The last pronoun in the speech, "us" pulls the crowd together and the coda "upon Saint Crispin's day" fills out the line rhythmically, allowing the actor to end the speech on a rhetorical high note.

Possibly the greatest triumph of rhetoric in Shakespeare, however, is one that is far too long and complex to quote here, but which I strongly recommend. In *Richard III*, evil, hunchbacked Richard manages to convince Anne to marry him right in front of the corpse of her husband, whom Richard has murdered. The scene requires immense acting skill to pull off, but when it is done successfully we are able to see the full force of Shakespeare's rhetorical skill, as Richard cleverly turns Anne's own hatred and emotional vulnerability into love for him.

Of course that is rhetoric for the stage, and even on the stage it is directed at one person. Rhetoric directed at a nation is a different story. Again I must invoke Churchill, who, upon becoming Prime Minister, began the task of rallying his nation in the famous *Blood, Toil, Tears and Sweat* speech:

"I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat.

We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind. We have before us many, many long months of struggle and of suffering. You ask, what is our policy? I can say: It is to wage war, by sea, land and air, with all our might and with all the strength that God can give us; to wage war against a monstrous tyranny, never surpassed in the dark, lamentable catalogue of human crime. That is our policy. You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word: It is victory, victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory, however long and hard the road may be; for without victory, there is no survival. Let that be realised; no survival for the British Empire, no survival for all that the British Empire has stood for, no survival for the urge and impulse of the ages, that mankind will move forward towards its goal. But I take up my task with buoyancy and hope. I feel sure that our cause will not be suffered to fail among men. At this time I feel entitled to claim the aid of all, and I say, 'come then, let us go forward together with our united strength.'

This speech is remarkable because Churchill is in fact giving very bad news to the British people, and yet he was able to inspire them. Note the use of anaphora (no survival, no survival, no survival), repetition (victory, victory), and the typically Churchillian technique of moving his audience first down and then up emotionally.

In his *We Shall Fight on the Beaches* speech Churchill does something very similar:

“I have, myself, full confidence that if all do their duty, if nothing is neglected, and if the best arrangements are made, as they are being made, we shall prove ourselves once again able to defend our Island home, to ride out the storm of war, and to outlive the menace of tyranny, if necessary for years, if necessary alone. At any rate, that is what we are going to try to do. That is the resolve of His Majesty’s Government—every man of them. That is the will of Parliament and the nation. The British Empire and the French Republic, linked together in their cause and in their need, will defend to the death their native soil, aiding each other like good comrades to the utmost of their strength. Even though large tracts of Europe and many old and famous States have fallen or may fall into the grip of the Gestapo and all the odious apparatus of Nazi rule, we shall not flag or fail. We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender, and even if, which I do not for a moment believe, this Island or a large part of it were subjugated and starving, then our Empire beyond the seas, armed and guarded by the British Fleet, would carry on the struggle, until, in God’s good time, the New World, with all its power and might, steps forth to the rescue and the liberation of the old.”

The repetition here (we shall fight, we shall fight, we shall fight) drums in to his hearers Churchill’s message, and it communicates that resolve to his other two important audiences: the enemies, who now know England’s resolve, and to America, whom England was trying to bring into the war. Churchill could not *plead* publicly for American help, as that would have undone his work at inspiring the British, but he could link his resolve to the eventual help he hoped to receive from America. This was very successful, and perhaps changed the course of world history.

It is tempting to close with such a brilliant piece of formal rhetoric, but I think it is important to notice how rhetoric may be evolving along with the culture, with formal schemes and tropes being abandoned to be replaced with something that seems more impromptu and unscripted (even if it is not). One of the most successful speeches of recent days did not feel like a speech at all, but rather like an unscripted talk (although it almost certainly was not). I refer to Rudy Giuliani’s speech at the 2004 Republican National Convention. Giuliani seemed to be speaking, perhaps, from notes, but not from a script, and he delivered his lines with emotional intensity but also without the kind of

classical, speech-sounding cadences of a traditional formal speech. Giuliani also told jokes throughout the speech, not only at the beginning, and he brilliantly alternated moments of high drama (speaking about the September 11th attacks on New York) with gentle comedy:

“And I remember the support being bipartisan and actually standing hand in hand Republicans and Democrats, here in New York and all over the nation.

During a Boston Red Sox game in the seventh inning there was a sign that read, “Boston loves New York.

You’re not going to see it now with a 4.5 game spread between the two teams.

And then one of the most remarkable experiences was, I was driving along and I saw a Chicago police officer directing traffic in the middle of Manhattan, sent here by Mayor Daley of Chicago, who was a good friend of ours, and is. And that’s what I mean about no Democrats or Republicans.

Well, the guy is directing traffic. And I got out to thank him, and I did. And then I went back in my car and all of a sudden, I had this thought: ‘I wonder where he’s sending these people.’

I think some of them are still driving around the Bronx, but it was very reassuring to know how much support we had, and I thank all of you for it, because you all gave us support—Republicans, Democrats, everyone.”

It is quite possible that Giuliani’s style of rhetoric will become more common as regular speech, or at least the illusion of regular speech, replaces scripting in more and more media. But even if this change occurs, the elements of rhetoric—from the speech-act foundations through audience analysis, structure, logic, figures, and subtleties—will still be present. For rhetoric is in the end the improvement of speech and communication, and as long as there are humans with a need to communicate, there will be a need for, and the practice of, rhetoric.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. Where did John Kerry go wrong in his 2004 convention speech?
2. What are some of the techniques of Churchill's rhetorical triumphs?

Suggested Reading

Collins, Owen. *Speeches That Changed the World*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999.

COURSE MATERIALS

Suggested Readings:

- Austin, J.L. *How to Do Things with Words*. 2nd ed. Eds. Marina Sbisa and J.O. Urmson. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005.
- Collins, Owen. *Speeches That Changed the World*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999.
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- Orwell, George. *The Orwell Reader: Fiction, Essays, and Reportage*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1984.
- Pinney, Thomas. *A Short Handbook and Style Sheet*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1977.
- Quinn, Arthur. *Figures of Speech: 60 Ways to Turn a Phrase*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1995.
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- Truss, Lynne. *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*. New York: Gotham, 2004.
- Walton, Douglas N. *Informal Logic: A Handbook for Critical Argumentation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Zinsser, William K. *On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006.

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Other Books of Interest:

- Aristotle. *The Art of Rhetoric*. Trans. J.H. Freese. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926.
- Bergmann, Merrie, James Moor, and Jack Nelson. *The Logic Book*. 4th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003.

COURSE MATERIALS

Other Books of Interest (continued):

- Booth, Wayne C. *The Rhetoric of Rhetoric: The Quest for Effective Communication*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, Inc., 2004.
- Cicero, Marcus Tullius. *Rhetorica ad Herennium*. Trans. Henry Caplan. Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954.
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- . "Tolkien's Prose Style and Its Literary and Rhetorical Effects." *Tolkien Studies* 1 (2004): 139–63.
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- Fowler, Henry. *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*. 2nd rev. ed. Intro. Simon Winchester. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
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- Parkes, M.B. *Pause and Effect: Punctuation in the West*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.
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